



Blend it like Beck

Images Victor Strugo

Continuing his long-standing love-affair with fine red wine blends, Victor Strugo for CLASSICFEEL explains how, contrary to the views of wine-making purists, some of the most exquisite vintages are created via a combination of elements, which at first, would appear to be incompatible.

Most of the world's greatest red wines are blends. The single-cultivar purist may liken the heady intoxication of an uncomplicated single varietal to the thrill of a youthful romance, but a complex red blend promises more. One can become entirely mesmerised by the aroma, taste and textural nuances of a wine that combines sleek, strong cabernet sauvignon with voluptuous merlot, secretive malbec, pert petit verdot, fragrant sangiovese or the smouldering earthiness of syrah. And each year's vintage brings subtle changes - like an experienced lover with infinite mysteries to unravel.

Of course one develops crushes. Since their 2000 vintage, I've drooled over Graham Beck's The William - a mixed marriage of classic cabernet and patriotic

pinotage. The dominant cab component stems from Stellenbosch, spending 13 months in French oak, while the pinotage originates from mature Franschoek vines, wallowing in American oak. Plummy, spicy and smoky, it's bigger than the sum of its parts even though these are not natural partners. But then, not everyone can blend it like Beck.

Of five other new releases that have also knocked my socks off, three hail from the insolently beautiful Devon Valley. Middelvei was acquired by the Momberg family in 1919, half a dozen years before Abraham Perold crossed pinot noir with hermitage grapes to create South Africa's own grape. Middelvei has long been a pinotage adherent, their Pinotage-Merlot blend being the first ever combination of our



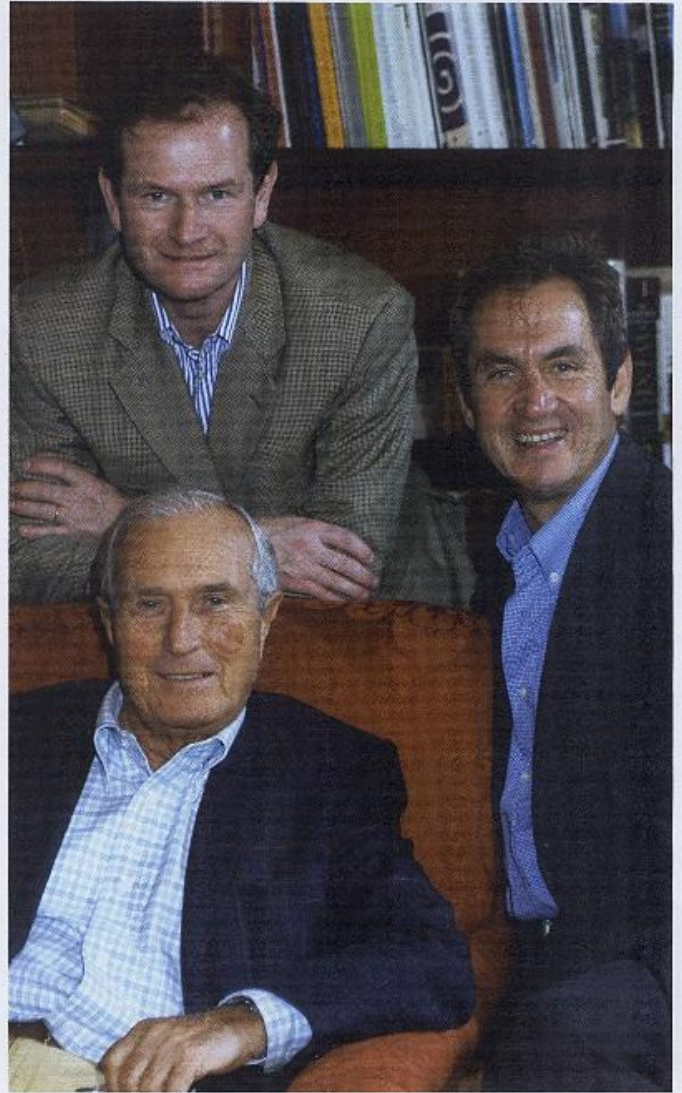
Morgenster - owner Giulio Bertrand (seated), consultant Pierre Lurton (standing) & winemaker Marius Lategan

home-grown variety with a Bordeaux staple (now termed 'Cape Blends'). The 2007 release is a richly aromatic easy quaffer, flaunting the luscious fruit of young Merlot plantings atop deeper pinotage characteristics from vines up to 40 years old. An endearing quirkiness of this estate is the naming of all their animals and pets after wines. Thus, visitors who ask for Pinotage may find that a dachshund responds!

Another long-standing pinotage adherent is Seymour Pritchard's neighbouring 27-hectare estate. Clos Malverne also boasts mind-blowing views but instead of eccentric pets they have a new spa and a tasting-room with a handy catering facility for cheese and antipasto platters. Talking of which, their Auret 2006 blend weighs in at 4 stars in the current Platter guide, half a star more than the Middelvlei. The Auret is always an elegant wine, the 2006 superimposing a spicy, jammy dimension onto a prominent cab sauv backbone and a 15% splash of merlot. Auret was among the first wines to change the minds of highly critical British writers about pinotage.

One of this country's most remarkable winemakers is Martin Meinert, well-known for his inspired crafting of Ken Forrester's world-beating chenin blancs but less often recognised as the man who really turned heads at Vergelegen. Meinert's Devon Valley farm produces two blends. The widely cherished Synchronicity is the rule-breaker that blends the same three grapes as Auret, while his parallel offering is the classical Bordeaux-style Devon Crest, whose label flaunts a bright orange heraldic symbol. First released in 1997 as Meinert Cabernet Sauvignon/Merlot, this became a firm favourite of mine, whose loss I mourned when it went into hibernation. The new incarnation was worth the wait: selected grapes from five vineyards, of which two-thirds is cab-sauv, a sparkling deep red jewel when swirled in the light, rich berry scents and cherry flavours with hints of mint, a velvet-smooth palate and 18 months of tannin maturation. Who could ask for anything more?

One possible answer from those in the know is: Morgenster's eponymous flagship. Giulio Bertrand's Helderberg wine and olive estate (their olive oil is arguably the country's very best) has earned its first high-five from Platter in a flurry of numerology. It's the 2005 vintage, their fifth release (all were 5-star finalists) and was launched on 5th March. Throw in a few multiples (15 years since Bertrand came out of retirement to plant vines, 25 years in the business for winemaker Marius Lategan and his 50th birthday) and you have enough coincidences to make you turn to drink. But there's nothing fortuitous about this nectar, Merlot-led in the style of a classic St Emilion – home turf to consulting



winemaker Pierre Lurton of Château Cheval-Blanc. Morgenster 2005 should be drunk in 5 years, naturally. Or maybe 15.

Although very much a New World brainchild, Paarl estate Vilafonté, whose name refers to its prevalent soil type, a moist clay on drainable pebble, echoes the left (tannic cabernet) bank – right bank (fruity merlot) polarity of Bordeaux in its own twin wines, Series C and Series M – respectively indicating the dominant cultivars. Platter 2009 has deemed the bold blackberry flavours, vanilla and coffee undertones of the 2006 Series C worthy of a quintuple nod.

That's an impressively precocious pinnacle for an upstart (first vines planted in '97, first bottling on '03) – and a surprise for this formidable partnership of Californian luminaries Zelma Long and Phil Freese with Warwick's prodigal son, Mike Ratcliffe. Even the globally influential magazine *Wine Enthusiast* was impressed, nominating Vilafonté as one of their five finalists for 'New World Winery of the Year'. **CF**